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SUBJECT: Human Rights and Religious Freedom in Hue

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The DCM marked the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by meeting with the Archbishop of Hue, as well as dissident priests from the banned political movement Bloc 8406 and leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. The Archbishop stressed the positive trajectory of religious freedom in Vietnam, as well as the strengthening of relations between the GVN and the Vatican, and praised provincial officials for resolving land disputes and returning Church property at the La Vang pilgrimage site. By contrast, the dissident priests and monks decried the lack of political and press freedom in Vietnam. END SUMMARY.

Views of the Archbishop of Hue

¶2. (SBU) Archbishop Eitenne Nguyen Nhu The and the Auxiliary Bishop of Hue Francois Xavier Le Van Hong met with the DCM on December 9. The Archbishop asserted that the Vatican and government of Vietnam need each other. The Vatican wants to establish relations to assist members of its flock, while the GVN wants to boost its international credibility by joining the 177 countries that currently have relations with the Holy See. Declaring that the Catholic Church in Vietnam is very different from the Catholic Church in China, the Archbishop explained that unlike in China, in Vietnam the Catholic Church has authority to send local leaders to the Vatican for meetings. The Archbishop speculated that the Vatican will not wait to establish ties until after moving forward with China. At the same time, he said that he does not believe the Pope will visit Vietnam if relations have not yet been established.

¶3. (SBU) Regarding the overall situation of religious freedom, the Archbishop stressed the positive trajectory of the country and said that progress continues year by year. He highlighted in particular the growing freedom of the past two years of Protestant churches, progress the Catholic Church welcomes.

Positive Results on Land Disputes

¶4. (SBU) The Archbishop praised efforts by provincial and local officials to work with the Church to resolve land disputes in An Bang parish by authorizing a land swap. The Archbishop considered the matter closed and emphatically stated that "there is no dispute." The Archbishop also applauded the efforts of provincial officials to return 16 hectares of land to the Church around the La Vang pilgrimage site; he said he was hopeful the Church would receive the formal land use certificate by the end of the year. He said that local officials hope to turn the area into a "spiritual tourism center" and noted that efforts are now being made to build new roads and provide better access to the area.

Don't Lecture or Impose Sanctions on Vietnam

¶5. (SBU) When asked what the U.S. could do to improve the situation of Religious Freedom in Vietnam, the Archbishop responded pointedly that the United States could help a lot, but should not impose

sanctions on Vietnam or try and force the GVN's hand. He stressed that it is important for the United States to respond to the situation as "constructively" as possible and to treat Vietnam as an equal partner. The Archbishop continued by asserting that when the U.S. lectures to GVN officials they get defensive because Vietnam is a small country.

Dissident Priests Speak out on Human Rights

¶6. (SBU) The DCM met with dissident priests Father Phan Van Loi and Father Nguyen Huu Giai, who expressed markedly different views. Father Loi stressed his belief that the Catholic Church in Vietnam is not free because it is not allowed to provide formal educational training or to open schools, except for kindergartens. He also stressed that the church is not allowed to own its own newspaper, publishing house, radio or television station, nor is it allowed to own land. When asked his thoughts about the Thai Ha land dispute and why the Vatican has chosen not to get involved, Father Giai stated, "the Vatican is far away and is acting diplomatic." In contrast to the Archbishop's optimistic assessment of the An Bang dispute, Fathers Loi and Giai stated that while the local parish had received assurances from local officials, the deal was not yet complete since the new parcel of land has yet to be handed over.

¶7. (SBU) Responding to an inquiry about imprisoned Hue dissident Father Nguyen Van Ly, Father Loi said that Fr. Ly's family members continue to visit him regularly, most recently two weeks ago. Loi affirmed that Father Ly remains of "sound mind and sound body" and said that two Catholic priests had received permission to visit and minister to Father Ly in prison around Christmas. Stressing their roles in Bloc 8406, Loi and Giai estimated there were approximately

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18 other priests whom they claimed were sympathetic to their cause but were too afraid to speak out publically.

¶8. (SBU) Father Loi, who was imprisoned for six years (1981-1987) for his outspoken political views and remained under house arrest from 2001 to 2004, stated that he is currently not allowed to participate in mass with the congregation, and suggested that the Church may not want him there because of pressure from the GVN. He said that while he is no longer officially under house arrest, police maintain a presence near his home. Father Giai, who was imprisoned from 1982-1988, said that he is allowed to travel freely but is followed. A self-proclaimed "internet addict," Father Loi said he gets around government efforts to cut his internet connection by subscribing to Wi-Fi. He is one of five editors of the independent online magazine "Freedom of Speech." (Note: two other editors, Father Ly and Nguyen Van Dai, are currently in jail, and two others, Father Tin and Nguyen Khac Toan, are subject to constant surveillance. END NOTE.)

UBCV Takes a Hard Line Against GVN

¶9. (SBU) The DCM also met with Venerable Thich Thien Hanh, Secretary General of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) Institute of the Sangha and Head of the UBCV Provincial Board in Hue, along with Venerable Thich Chi Thang, at the Bao Quoc Pagoda in Hue also on December 10. Hanh thanked the DCM for her inquiry after the health of Patriarch Thich Quang Do and said that he is very healthy and doing well.

Hanh was less patient when asked to describe the UBCV's current situation, noting that it was the fourth or fifth time he had done so with USG representatives. He said that the UBCV faces many difficulties and that the goal of the GVN is to abolish the UBCV. The GVN claims, falsely according to Hanh, that the Buddhist Church North and UBCV merged in 1981 to create the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha. He stressed that those who represented the UBCV during the talks were not actually UBCV monks, but were Communist monks appointed by the government. Asked to provide examples of more current persecution, Hanh complained bitterly about GVN treatment of Buddhists who had attended the funeral this year of former Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and said that the GVN had prevented many from participating and even prohibited the word "patriarch" on banners on

floral arrangements presented at the funeral.

¶10. (SBU) Hanh dismissed any suggestion that the UBCV should attempt to register as a religion, arguing that this would delegitimize the Church. He said that in effect the Church had informally asked to be recognized by the government through open letters to senior government officials. Asked what the United States could do to increase religious freedom, Hanh stated that change would only occur if the United States aggressively pressed Vietnam. He encouraged the United States to redesignate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern and to push Vietnam on human rights. He also urged the United States to affirm Vietnam's sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel islands.

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